



# Half-unit-cell $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ monolayer with sulfur vacancies for photocatalytic hydrogen evolution

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer  
Carrier lifetime  
Photocatalytic hydrogen evolution

## ABSTRACT

Two-dimensional (2D) photocatalytic materials have attracted extensive attention due to the unique properties different from those of their bulk. 2D  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  nanosheets with the intrinsic bilayer in one-unit-cell with interlayer force generally perform better than that of the bulk in photocatalytic hydrogen evolution. Here, we for the first time demonstrate that the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer possesses an excellent photocatalytic performance compared with the one-unit-cell bilayer owing to its increased carrier lifetime. Meanwhile, sulfur vacancies are introduced in the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer to trap the photo-generated electrons and further prolong the carrier lifetime. First-principle calculations reveal that sulfur vacancies in the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer induce more charge carriers at the valence band maximum to participate in the photocatalytic activity. As expected, the photocatalytic hydrogen production rate of the monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  with sulfur vacancies is up to 13.478 mmol/g/h under the visible light irradiation, which is much higher than the available values reported of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  so far. These findings provide a new strategy for optimization of 2D photocatalysts to enhance photocatalytic hydrogen evolution.

## 1. Introduction

Photocatalytic hydrogen evolution through water splitting, as an important potential method for clean energy production by utilizing solar energy directly, has received much attention [1–3]. However, improving the photocatalytic efficiency is still a great challenge in practical applications [1]. Fortunately, the discovery of 2D materials has opened up one effective approach to enhance photocatalytic performance owing to their unique properties including high specific surface areas, better charge-carrier separation rate, and abundant surface active sites [4,5]. Among various 2D semiconductor materials,  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  is attracting dramatically increasing interest due to its visible-light absorption, photo-stability and suitable energy band gap structure for hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) [6,7]. To date, few-layer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  nanosheets have been produced because of the intrinsic bilayer structure in one-unit-cell with interlayer force, and they generally exhibits better than that of the bulk in photocatalytic hydrogen production performance. Actually, there is another 2D  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ , i.e., the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer, but it has rarely been investigated [8,9].

Benefiting from the peculiar electronic structures, monolayer materials exhibit different properties compared with the few-layer

materials such as  $\text{WS}_2$ ,  $\text{WSe}_2$ , BN, and  $\text{MoS}_2$  [10–13]. In particular, monolayer graphene has been applied in various fields due to the larger specific surface area, higher electron mobility and thermal conductivity [14–16]. As for 2D photocatalyst, it can readily shorten the diffusion distance of charge carriers with the reduction in the thickness, which can greatly prolong the lifetime of photo-generated charge carriers [17]. From this perspective, 2D monolayer should have a great prospect in photocatalysis. Nonetheless, there have no any studies about the comparison of photocatalytic performance between the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer and the unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer. Therefore, the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer should be desired to exploit as an advanced photocatalyst.

On the other hand, vacancy engineering has been considered as an effective strategy to improve photocatalytic efficiency in the recent years. For instance, oxygen vacancies in ultrathin  $\text{In}_2\text{O}_3$  sheets could enhance the absorption of visible light through narrowing the band gap by appearance of a defect level. Further, it can trap the photo-generated electrons to effectively suppress the recombination of carrier, and thus enhancing the water splitting performance [18]. Similar phenomena are also observed in  $\text{ZnS}$  with sulfur vacancies,  $\text{Bi}_2\text{WO}_6$  and  $\text{SrTiO}_3$  with oxygen vacancies [19–21]. Inspired by these researches, sulfur

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2019.02.027>

Received 8 December 2018; Received in revised form 24 January 2019; Accepted 12 February 2019

Available online 13 February 2019

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vacancies should be designed in the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer to improve the HER performance.

Herein, the one-unit-cell bilayer and half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer were synthesized using a hydrothermal method with different solvents. Compared with the one-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer, the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer exhibits better photocatalytic hydrogen evolution due to the shorter diffusion length which effectively inhibits the recombination of photo-generated electron-hole pairs. Interestingly, excess thioacetamide can be adsorbed on the surface of the primary nanocrystal, which can partially hinder the growth of crystal and lead to the formation of the structure with vacancies [22,23]. Therefore, sulfur vacancies were introduced in the half-unit-cell  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer to trap the photo-generated electrons and prolong the carrier lifetime. Intriguingly, the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer with sulfur vacancies exhibits a high photocatalytic hydrogen production rate up to 13.478 mmol/g/h under the visible light irradiation, which is approximately 16.9 and 7.8 times higher than that of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer and monolayer, respectively, due to longer carrier lifetime and the unique electronic structure, which is supported by the characterizations and the first-principles calculations. These findings provide a new perspective to design photocatalyst with lamellar structure for accessing efficient photocatalytic hydrogen production.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Materials

$\text{Zn}(\text{CH}_3\text{COO})_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (99.8%),  $\text{InCl}_3$  (99.8%), thioacetamide (TAA, 99.8%), triethanolamine (TEOA, 98%) were obtained from Alfa Aesar. Polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF, AR), 1-methyl-2-pyrrolidinone (NMP, 99%), 3',5,5'-tetramethyl-benzidine (TMB, 99%) and peroxidase (POD, 300 u/mg) were purchased from Aladdin Industrial Corporation. Absolute ethanol and  $\text{NaSO}_4$  (99%) were purchased from Guangzhou Chemical Reagent Factory. All the materials were used without further purification. Deionized water ( $18.2 \text{ M}\Omega \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) was used throughout the experiments.

### 2.2. Synthesis of $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ bilayer

To synthesize the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer, 0.4 mmol  $\text{Zn}(\text{CH}_3\text{COO})_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , 0.8 mmol  $\text{InCl}_3$  and 1.6 mmol TAA were dissolved in 30 ml deionized water with vigorous stirring for 30 min. Then, the mixture was transferred into a 50 ml Teflon-lined autoclave and heated at  $180^\circ\text{C}$  for 24 h. After cooling down to room temperature, the obtained products, labeled as B-ZIS, were collected by centrifugation, washed several times with deionized water and ethanol, and dried at  $80^\circ\text{C}$  in air.

### 2.3. Synthesis of $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ monolayer

The procedure of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer is similar to that of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer except that all the raw materials were dissolved 15 ml deionized water and 15 ml absolute ethanol. And it was designated as M-ZIS.

### 2.4. Synthesis of $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ monolayer with sulfur vacancies

The procedure of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer with sulfur vacancies is similar to that of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer except that the raw material TAA was added in solution at 3.2 mmol, and then the obtained product was designated as M-ZIS-S.

### 2.5. Characterizations

The structures of the as-prepared powders were analyzed on a Rigaku D/Max-III A X-ray diffractometer detector with  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda = 1.5406 \text{ \AA}$ , 40 kV, 20 mA) at scanning speed of  $5^\circ \text{ min}^{-1}$  in the  $2\theta$

range of  $10\text{--}80^\circ$ . The detailed microstructures were observed using transmission electron microscopy (TEM, FEI Tecnai G2 F30). The surface morphology and thickness profile were acquired on a Bruker Multimode 8 atomic force microscope (AFM) operated at the tapping mode. The Raman spectra were recorded by an in Via Raman Microscope (Renishaw, England) with a He-Ne laser with a wavelength of 514 nm and maximum output power of 6 mW. The binding energies of Zn, In, S and valence band (VB) were acquired using an ESCALAB 250 X-ray photoelectron spectrometer (XPS, Thermo Fisher Scientific). All of the binding energies were calibrated to the C 1s peak of adventitious surface carbon at 284.8 eV. The electron spin resonance spectra (ESR) were recorded on a Bruker A300 EPR spectrometer at 300 K and 9.86 GHz. The amount of Zn, In and S in M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S were measured by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS). The UV-vis diffuse reflection spectra (UV-vis DRS) were acquired using a Shimadzu UV-3600 spectrophotometer. The photo-luminescence (PL) spectra (excited by 470 nm light) and time-resolved photoluminescence spectroscopy (TRPL) under the excitation of a hydrogen flash lamp with the wavelength at 406.2 nm (nF900, Edinburgh Instruments) were obtained using a FLSP920 fluorescence lifetime spectrophotometer. The Zeta potentials were determined by EliteSizer Nanoparticle size-Zeta potential and molecular weight analyzer. The specific surface area was determined by the Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) method using a Micromeritics ASAP 2020 M system. Electrochemical measurements were performed on a CHI660E electrochemistry workstation at room temperature. All the measurements were carried out in  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4$  (0.5 M,  $\text{pH} = 6.8$ ) solution and conducted in a conventional three-electrode cell by using Ag/AgCl (sat. KCl) electrode as the reference electrode, a graphite sheet as the counter electrode and the sample on the fluoride tin oxide (FTO) with an active area of  $1.0 \times 1.0 \text{ cm}^2$  as the working electrode. The working electrode was prepared as follows: 1 mg of the sample, 20  $\mu\text{l}$  5 mg/ml PVDF solution and 20  $\mu\text{l}$  NMP were mixed by ultrasonic oscillation to obtain a suspension, which was then coated onto the FTO glass substrate. Finally, the coated FTO glass was dried at  $60^\circ\text{C}$  to obtain the working electrode.

### 2.6. Photocatalytic hydrogen ( $\text{H}_2$ ) evolution activity

The photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  evolution activity was carried out in a 250 ml Pyrex top-irradiation photo-reactor connected to a closed gas-circulation system using a 300 W Xe lamp equipped with a 400 nm cut-off filter at  $5^\circ\text{C}$ . The light power density is  $80 \text{ mW/cm}^2$ . 20 mg photocatalyst was dispersed in 100 ml aqueous solution containing 10 ml TEOA as sacrificial reagents in a Pyrex flask. After a 30 min degassing pretreatment, the suspension was irradiated for 5 h and the amount of  $\text{H}_2$  was analyzed using an on-line gas chromatograph (SP7800, TCD, molecular sieve  $5^\circ\text{A}$ ,  $\text{N}_2$  carrier, Beijing Keruida Limited). To evaluate the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution stability, the photocatalyst was reused for four times. And the quantum efficiency (QE) was detected under irradiation for 5 h with various band-pass filter including 365, 405, 420, 500, 580, and 670 nm which the average intensity of irradiation were 2.51, 6.45, 4.93, 5.32, 4.03 and  $7.13 \text{ mW/cm}^2$ , respectively.

### 2.7. Hydrogen peroxide ( $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ ) detection experiment

The photo-produced  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  was detected by UV-vis spectroscopy using TMB as the peroxide indicator. Herein, 0.2 mg photocatalyst was added into 2 ml aqueous solution containing 6.25  $\mu\text{mol/ml}$  POD and 500  $\mu\text{mol/ml}$  TMB in the dark. Then, the color changed to blue by irradiation for 10 min using a 300 W Xe lamp with a 400 nm cut-off filter under vacuum. After centrifugation, the reaction supernatant was collected to measure the absorbance of the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  at a characteristic peak wavelength of 652 nm.

## 2.8. Calculation method

The theoretical simulations are carried out by the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) package based on the density functional theory (DFT) calculations. The Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) within the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) treats the exchange-correlation functional, while the projected augmented wave (PAW) describes the electron-ion interaction. Moreover, the kinetic energy cutoff and k-point meshes are set to be 500 eV and  $9 \times 9 \times 1$ , respectively. Meanwhile, the convergence criterion of the energy and force within the process of geometric optimization is chosen as  $10^{-5}$  eV and 0.01 eV/Å, respectively. And the vacuum region of 20 Å are applied to eliminate the interaction due to the periodic image in the 2D  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer system.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Morphology and structure of $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ nanosheets

Morphology and structure of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  bilayer (B-ZIS), the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer (M-ZIS) and the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer with S vacancies (M-ZIS-S) samples were systemically characterized. Fig. S1 shows the XRD patterns of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S. The peaks of all the samples are in good agreement with the standard pattern of the hexagonal  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  (JCPDS file No. 72-0773), revealing the high purity. And the 2θ diffraction peaks at  $21.5^\circ$ ,  $27.6^\circ$ ,  $30.4^\circ$ ,  $39.7^\circ$ ,  $47.1^\circ$ ,  $52.4^\circ$ , and  $55.5^\circ$  can be indexed to (006), (102), (104), (108), (110), (116), and (202), respectively. However, the intensity of the diffraction peak of facet (104) of M-ZIS-S becomes weaker due to the reaction with a high concentration of TAA which could inhibit the growth of crystal [23]. It suggests that M-ZIS-S may achieve a defect structure.

As depicted in Fig. 1a–c, TEM images reveal that all the samples have a hexagonal ultrathin structure. Moreover, HRTEM image shows the interplanar crystal spacing of M-ZIS-S is 0.32 nm which can be assigned to the (102) face of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  in Fig. 1d in the region indicated by the red square in Fig. 1c. And the absence of some atoms can be seen clearly in the white circle in Fig. 1e of the false-color image of the HRTEM image, arising from the existence of defects. This observation confirms that M-ZIS-S has a defect structure via solvothermal method with excess TAA which is in line with the XRD results. Furthermore, AFM was carried out to measure the thickness of the samples. The thickness of B-ZIS is about 2.5 nm (Fig. S2a and 2b), indicating that the obtained B-ZIS has two layer structure based on bilayer with a thickness of 2.468 nm along the c axis, while the thickness of M-ZIS nanosheet is about 1.1–1.3 nm (Fig. S2c and 2d). As described in Fig. 1f, M-ZIS-S exhibits a thickness of 1.29 nm and the corresponding height profiles is shown in Fig. 1g. Meanwhile, many nanosheets were measured in Fig. S2e and 2f to obtain the thickness. It suggests that M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S have a monolayer structure.

Furthermore, Raman spectroscopy was carried out to obtain more information about the crystal structure of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ . As shown in Fig. 1h, the Raman spectra of all the samples are characterized by three Raman bands around 248, 294, and  $358\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which can be assigned to the longitudinal optical mode ( $\text{LO}_1$ ), transverse optical mode ( $\text{TO}_2$ ), and longitudinal optical mode ( $\text{LO}_2$ ) of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ , respectively [24,25]. However, the intensity of Raman peaks in M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S become weaker and broader than that of B-ZIS and the peaks exhibit a slight shift due to the different number of layers according to previous Raman spectral analysis of  $\text{WS}_2$  and  $\text{WSe}_2$  [10,11]. This analysis is in good agreement with the result of AFM for  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ . Obviously, compared with M-ZIS, the intensity enhancement in M-ZIS-S is attributed to the presence of vacancies [26]. From these results, the graphical representations of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S are shown in Fig. 1i to clearly illustrate the different in morphology.

To further identify the presence of S vacancy of samples, the chemical states of S, Zn and In in M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S were analyzed using

XPS measurements. As depicted in Fig. 2a, the spectrum of S 2p in the samples can be fitted to two peaks which are assigned to divalent sulfide ions ( $\text{S}^{2-}$ ) [27]. Compared with M-ZIS (161.60 eV, 162.77 eV), the binding energy and the intensity of S 2p in M-ZIS-S (161.35 eV, 162.52 eV) become smaller and weaker, suggesting that there are S vacancies in the structure due to low-coordination S [28–30]. Meanwhile, the intensity ratio of S 2p in M-ZIS-S and M-ZIS is smaller than that of In 3d and Zn 2p (in Supplementary Table 1), which further explain that S vacancies exist in M-ZIS-S benefiting from the reduction of S content. Similarly, this phenomenon is also observed in the In 3d and Zn 2p spectra of M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S (Fig. 2b and 2c), ascribing to  $\text{In}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Zn}^{2+}$ , respectively [9]. The binding energies for In  $3d_{5/2}$  and In  $3d_{3/2}$  in M-ZIS-S (444.77 eV, 452.31 eV) are lower than those of M-ZIS (444.91 eV, 452.45 eV), as well as that of Zn 2p. However, compared with M-ZIS (1022.05 eV and 1045.11 eV), two peaks at 1021.86 eV and 1044.92 eV contributing from Zn 2p  $3/2$  and 2p  $1/2$  of M-ZIS-S (Fig. 2c) are shifted down for 0.19 eV, which is over that of In, indicating that the loss of S atoms around Zn relative to In [30]. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  with S vacancies could be prepared successfully by solvothermal method with excess TAA. Additionally, ICP-MS was employed to accurately analyze the amounts of Zn, In and S in M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S. The atomic ratio of Zn, In and S in M-ZIS is 1 : 2.2 : 3.6 and the atomic ratio in M-ZIS-S is 1 : 2.2 : 2.6. From the comparison about the atomic proportions of M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S, it can be identified that the S vacancies exist in M-ZIS-S. Moreover, the ESR spectra were employed to further confirm the existence of S-Vacancy in M-ZIS-S which can provide sensitive and direct information about behaviors of native defects. As shown in Fig. 2d, it's obvious to find that M-ZIS-S exhibits a sharp ESR signal at 3503 G (g-value of 2.007), indicating the existence of S vacancies [19,31,32]. On the contrary, the absence of this resonance signal in B-ZIS and M-ZIS confirms that there is no S Vacancy existing in the control sample. This is consistent with the XPS results. Therefore, all the results further demonstrate that  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  has been successfully prepared into monolayer 2D nanosheet with S vacancy.

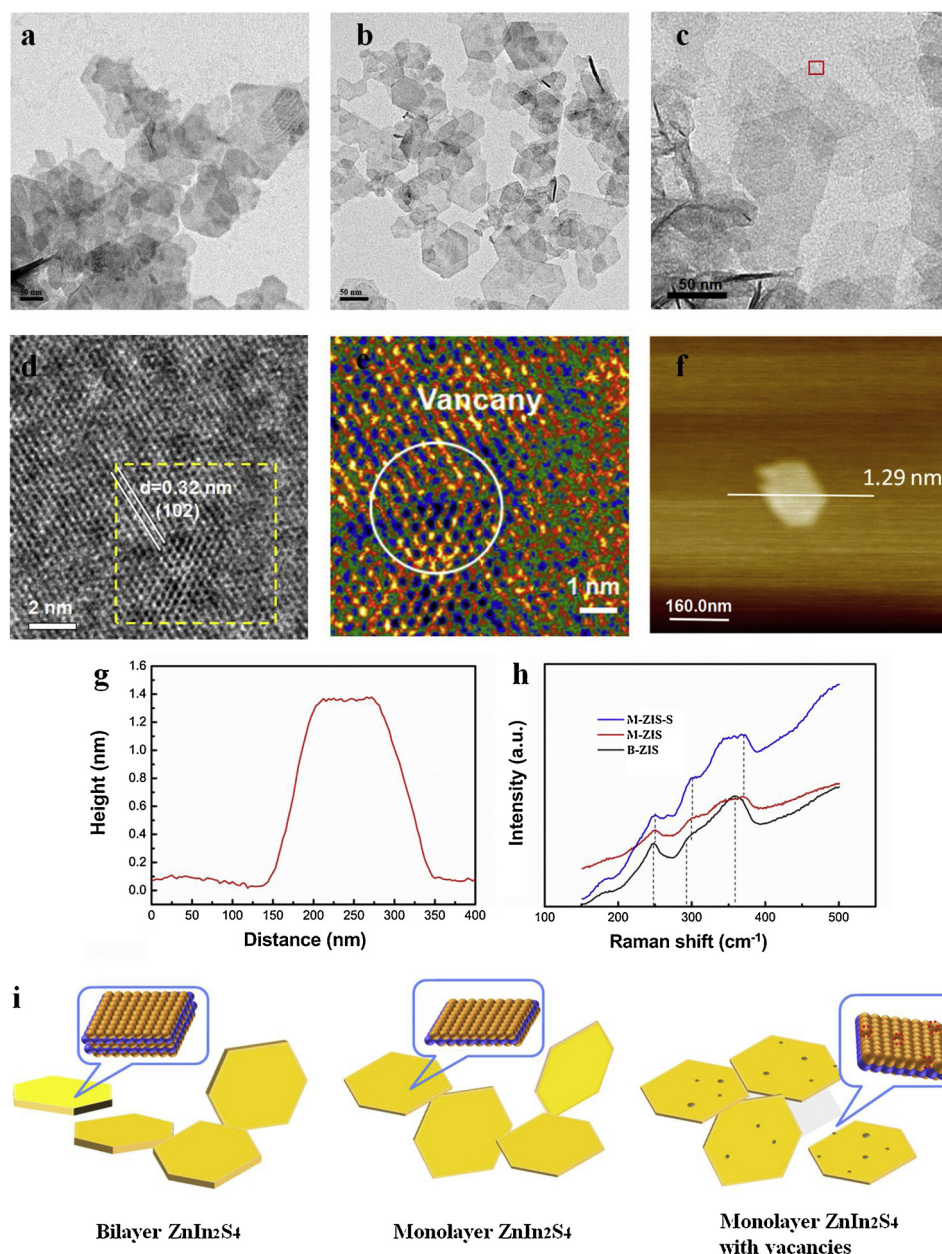
### 3.2. UV–vis absorption properties

The UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra of the as-prepared samples were investigated within the scope of 200–800 nm. As can be seen from Fig. 3a, all the sample have a steep absorption edge located from 410 nm to 570 nm, indicating the photo-response in visible light region. Compared with B-ZIS and M-ZIS, M-ZIS-S exhibits slight red shift absorption due to the existence of S vacancy which can absorb more visible light during the photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  activity [33]. Meanwhile, the optical band gap ( $E_g$ ) of  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$ , a direct band gap material [34], can be estimated using the Kubelka–Munk function:  $ah\nu^2 = A(h\nu - E_g)$ . As depicted in Fig. 3b, the intersection of the tangent with the x-axis can give a good approximation of the  $E_g$  values of the samples, estimating to be 2.34, 2.39 and 2.31 eV for B-ZIS, M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S, respectively.

### 3.3. Photocatalytic activity for $\text{H}_2$ production

The photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  evolution was evaluated under visible-light irradiation ( $\lambda \geq 400\text{ nm}$ ) in deionized water with TEOA as a hole sacrificial agent. As illustrated in Fig. 4a, M-ZIS exhibits a higher photocatalytic activity compared with B-ZIS, whereas M-ZIS-S shows a higher photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production performance than that of B-ZIS and M-ZIS for 4 h. In order to further examine the photocatalytic activity, the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate was calculated and shown in Fig. 4b. Clearly, M-ZIS-S has the highest  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate of 13.478 mmol/g/h, which is approximately 7.8 and 16.87 times higher than that of B-ZIS and M-ZIS. Moreover, M-ZIS exhibits an enhanced  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate of 1.723 mmol/g/h, in comparison to that of B-ZIS (0.799 mmol/g/h). Fig. 4c presents the action spectra of the photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production rate with the UV–vis absorption spectrum for M-ZIS-S. It can be seen





**Fig. 1.** (a), (b) TEM image of B-ZIS and M-ZIS, respectively, (c) TEM image of M-ZIS-S with a red box indicating a region of interest, (d) HRTEM image of the region outlined in red in (c), (e) false-colour image of the HRTEM image of the region outlined in yellow in (d), (f) AFM image, and (g) the corresponding height profiles of M-ZIS-S, (h) Raman spectra and (i) the graphical representations of B-ZIS, M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

that the variation trend of wavelength-dependent photocatalytic  $H_2$  generation rate is nearly in line with the absorbance spectrum, illustrating that the light response indeed drives the  $H_2$  production. Meanwhile, the QE of M-ZIS-S at different monochromatic light were calculated in Fig.S3. The QE at  $\lambda$  of 365 nm has the highest value up to 53.68% and decreases with increasing wavelength. This result demonstrates that enhancing the light absorption is beneficial to improve the efficiency of solar-to-hydrogen conversion. Besides high hydrogen production rate, stability of photocatalyst is also an important factor for practical application. Therefore, the cycling photocatalytic performance of M-ZIS-S was investigated, shown in Fig. 4d. Obviously, the photocatalytic activity still remains unchanged after 3 cycles and has a little deterioration in the fourth test which might be related to the consumption of the sacrificial reagents. Although the activity for the  $H_2$  evolution exhibits a slight decrease, it still demonstrates the stability of

M-ZIS-S for photocatalytic performance. Additionally, XRD pattern of M-ZIS-S shows no distinct difference between fresh and used sample in Fig. S4. This result further confirms the sufficient stability of M-ZIS-S.

### 3.4. Optical properties and electrochemical characteristics

Having a good absorption of visible light, M-ZIS-S has a better photocatalytic performance. However, the behavior of light-generated electron-hole pairs is also an important factor to affect performance. Therefore, it is necessary to study the lifetime of photo-generated carriers. PL emission spectra are used to investigate the behavior of light-generated electron-hole pairs in photocatalysts to verify the charge separation effect. In Fig. 5a, among the three samples, B-ZIS shows the strongest emission peak at 554 nm owing to the rapid recombination of electron-hole pairs. In contrast, M-ZIS has a weaker PL peak attributing

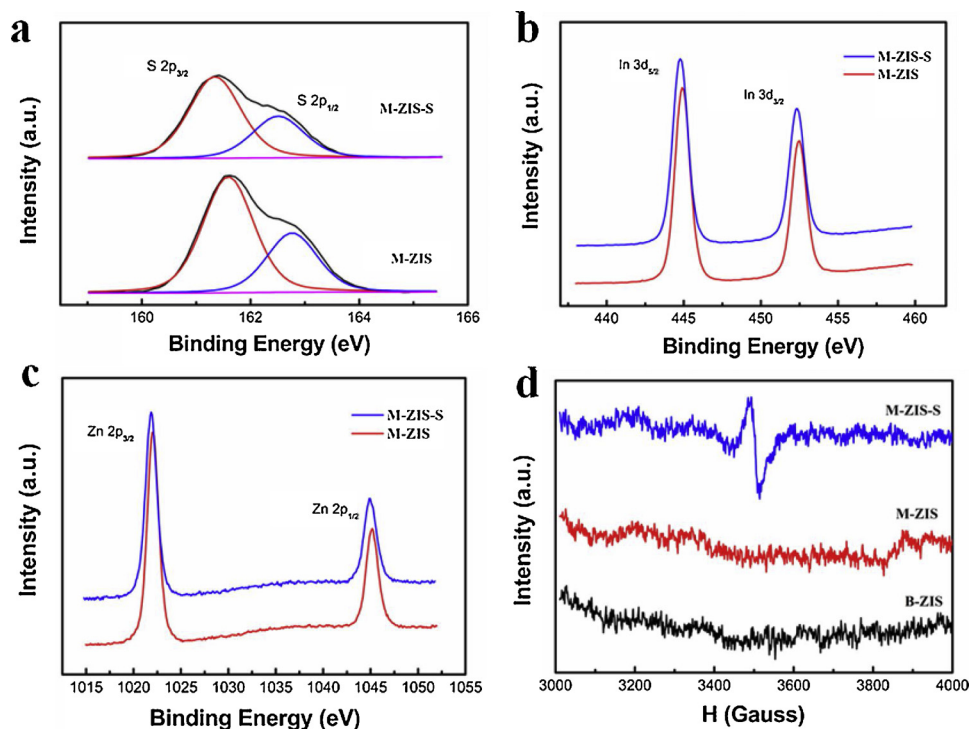


Fig. 2. (a) S 2p, (b) In 3d and (c) Zn 2p XPS spectra of M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S, (d) ESR spectra of B-ZIS, M-ZIS and M-ZIS-S.

to the fast transfer of electrons or holes in the shorter diffusion length in monolayer structure, and there is the weakest PL peak in M-ZIS-S due to the existence of S vacancies. These analyses demonstrate that it's beneficial for electrons or holes to diffuse to the surface with the reduction of thickness, thus effectively inhibiting the recombination of photo-generated electron hole pairs. And then the introduction of S vacancies could trap electrons to separate photo-excited electron-hole pairs for the enhanced photocatalytic performance[35].

Furthermore, TRPL decay spectra are performed to investigate the migration process of photo-induced charge carriers. The average PL lifetime ( $\tau_A$ ) could be calculated according to the equation [36]

$$\tau_A = \frac{A_1 \tau_1^2 + A_2 \tau_2^2}{A_1 \tau_1 + A_2 \tau_2}$$

where  $\tau_1$  and  $\tau_2$  are the fluorescent lifetime,  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are the corresponding amplitudes. It's known that the  $\tau_A$  is related to the short lifetime components ( $\tau_1$ ) and the long lifetime components ( $\tau_2$ ), which are originated from the non-radiative recombination of charge carriers in the surface defect states and ascribed to the interband recombination of the free excitons in the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  nanosheets, respectively [37]. As displayed in the inset table of Fig. 5b, the  $\tau_A$  of M-ZIS is prolonged to

3.23 ns compared with the B-ZIS ( $\tau_A = 2.86$  ns), principally attributing to the fast transfer of charge to the surface in the monolayer, which suggest that the electron-hole recombination is dramatically restrained to enhance the photocatalytic activity. As for the M-ZIS-S, the  $\tau_1$  (0.542 ns) and  $\tau_2$  (5.59 ns) are longer than that of B-ZIS ( $\tau_1 = 0.408$  ns,  $\tau_2 = 3.41$  ns) and M-ZIS ( $\tau_1 = 0.514$  ns,  $\tau_2 = 3.79$  ns), mainly deriving from the presence of S vacancies for trapping photo-generated electrons to delay the recombination of electron-hole pairs and the band structure. Apparently, M-ZIS-S has a longer average lifetime ( $\tau_A = 5.04$  ns) with respect to B-ZIS ( $\tau_A = 2.86$  ns) and M-ZIS ( $\tau_2 = 3.41$  ns). Benefiting from the existence of S vacancies, the photo-generated electrons on the bottom of conduction band (CB) could be trapped by non-radiative S vacancies and then undergo trap-to-trap hopping for donor-acceptor recombination instead of directly jumping to the valence band (VB) for recombination, leading to the extended carries lifetime [38]. Therefore, M-ZIS-S has good photocatalytic properties that should be ascribed to the much increased lifetime value. This result can be further confirmed by the electrochemical impedance spectroscopy of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S in Fig. 5c. Clearly, the electron-transfer resistance decreases in the order of B-ZIS > M-ZIS > M-ZIS-S, implying that more effective separation of photo-generated electron-hole pair

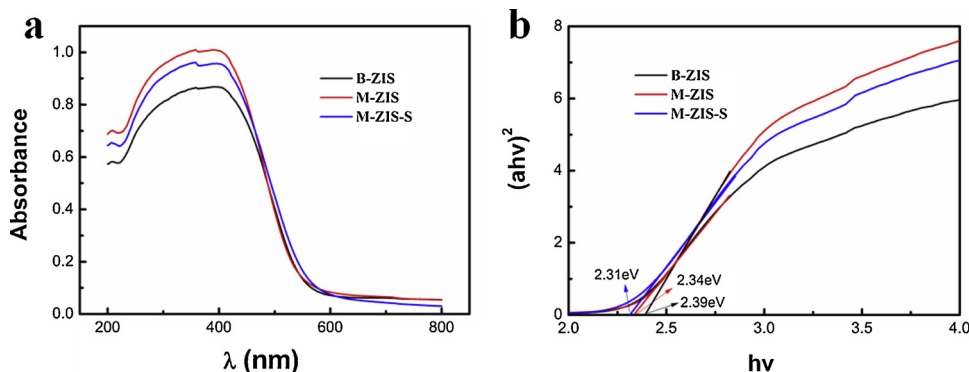


Fig. 3. (a) UV-vis DRS and (b)  $(\alpha h\nu)^2$  versus  $(h\nu)$  plots of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S.

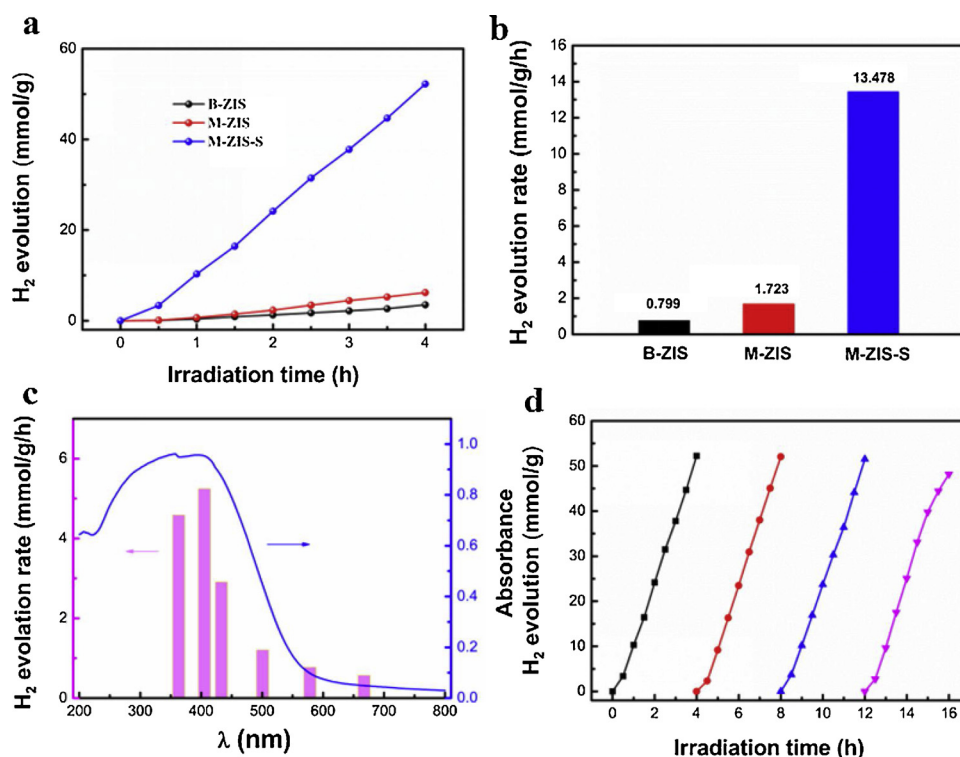


Fig. 4. (a) Photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> evolution and (b) H<sub>2</sub> evolution rates of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S. (c) Wavelength-dependent H<sub>2</sub> production rate, (d) Recycling photocatalytic test of M-ZIS-S.

transport in M-ZIS-S due to the smaller semicircular part of the Nyquist plots which reflects the charge transfer process. This result is in line with the results of PL and TRPL analyses.

To explore other influences, the surface area of samples were

investigated by BET Nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms in Fig.S5. The surface area of M-ZIS (75.41 m<sup>2</sup>/g) is larger than that of B-ZIS (61.66 m<sup>2</sup>/g), demonstrating that M-ZIS can expose more surface to participate in reactivity which is beneficial for photocatalysis. As for M-

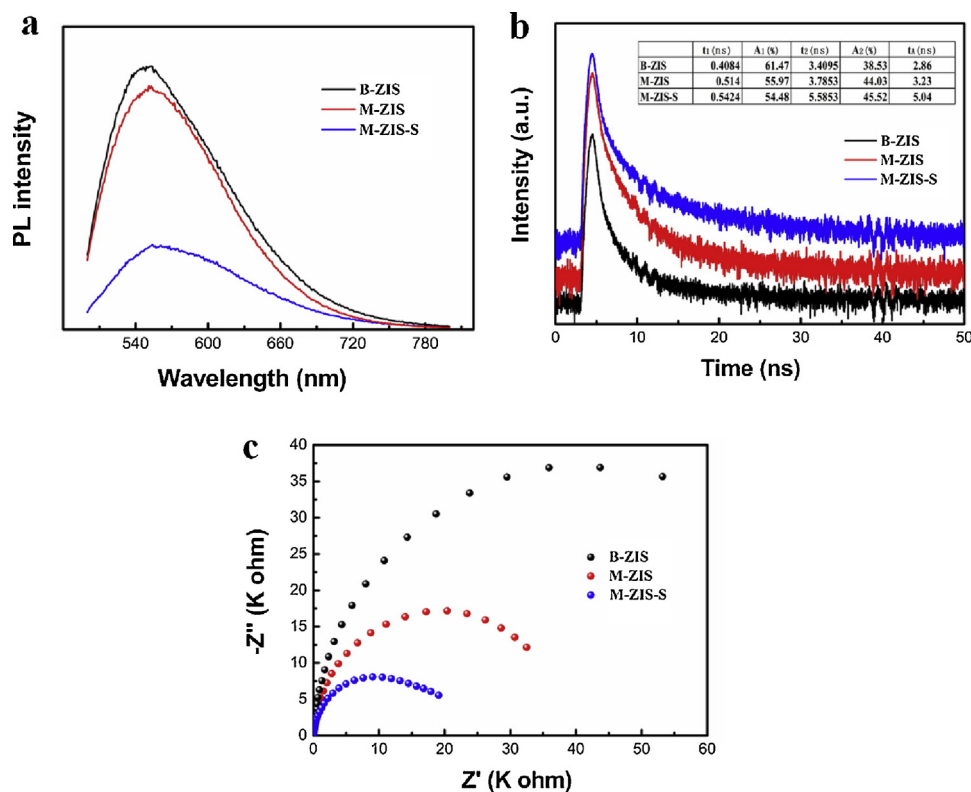
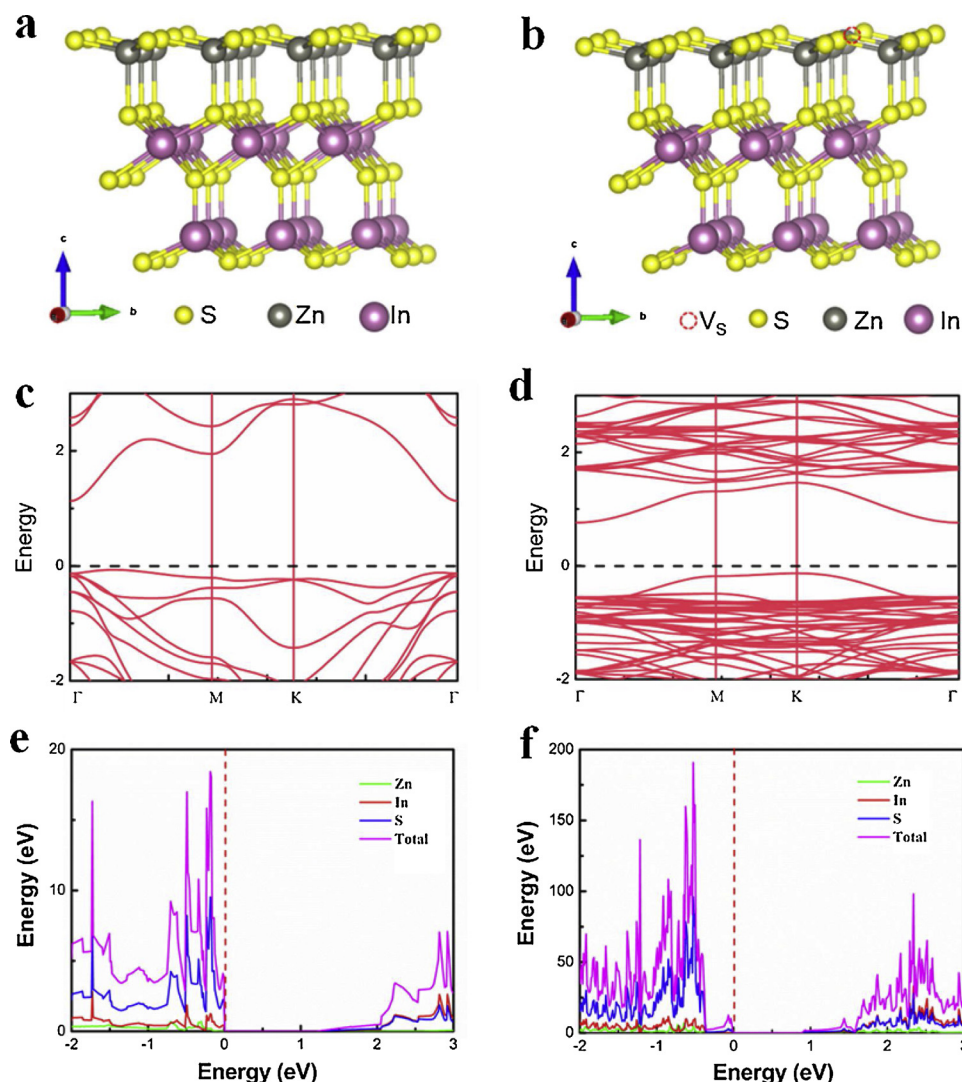


Fig. 5. (a) PL spectra (b) TRPL decay spectra and (c) EIS of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S.





**Fig. 6.** (a) (b) The geometric structure, (c) (d) band structure, and (e) (f) density of states (DOS) of monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  and monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  with S vacancy, respectively.

ZIS-S, it has the largest surface area ( $82.53 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ ) to increase more active reaction sites, leading to the enhanced photocatalytic performance. Furthermore, the linear sweep voltammetry for the as-prepared samples was measured to assess the overpotential which is a criterion to evaluate the HER reaction. A smaller overpotential value for catalyst may indicate that it is easier to product  $\text{H}_2$  [39]. As shown in Fig. S6, to reach a current density of  $10 \text{ mA}/\text{cm}^2$ , an indicator related to solar fuel synthesis [40], the overpotential of M-ZIS is  $1.16 \text{ eV}$  versus reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE), which is smaller than that of B-ZIS ( $1.23 \text{ eV}$ ), while M-ZIS-S has the smallest value ( $1.14 \text{ eV}$ ). In addition, Fig. S7 shows that the zeta potential of M-ZIS-S ( $-39.64 \text{ mV}$ ) is more negative than that of B-ZIS ( $-11.35 \text{ mV}$ ) and M-ZIS ( $-15.56 \text{ mV}$ ), indicating that M-ZIS-S can absorb more protons on surface for HER.

### 3.5. Theoretical calculation

To further investigate the effect of S vacancy in the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer, the theoretical models are constructed, and we also study their electronic properties used the first-principle calculations within the density functional theory (DFT) framework. The band gap can be obtained from the electronic structure in Fig. 6c and d. Obviously, the band gap of monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  with S vacancy is smaller than the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer, which is in accordance with the change trend from

the result of UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectra. On top of that, the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer with S vacancy exhibits a different electronic structure from the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer ascribing to the contribution by atomic orbitals, which suggests that the electronic properties can be influenced greatly due to the introduction of S vacancy. To further obtain the underlying physical meanings, the density of states (DOS) for the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer and that with S vacancy are depicted in Fig. 6e and f. It's clearly see that both valence band maximum (VBM) and conduction band minimum (CBM) in the monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  and that with S vacancy are mainly contributed by the S orbital, indicating that S atomic play a dominant role in electronic structure. And the detail information of DOS can be seen in Fig. S8 and S9. For the CBM, both of them are contributed from In-5s5p and S-3p orbital. As for the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer, the VBM is mainly contributed by the S-3p orbital, whereas the VBM of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer with S vacancy is contributed of S-3p and Zn-3p orbital. Moreover, it can be seen that the monolayer  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  with S vacancy always exhibits an increased DOS with respect to that of the  $\text{ZnIn}_2\text{S}_4$  monolayer (Fig. S10), demonstrating that the introduction of S vacancies can affect the electron structure to a large extent, and thus adding more charge carriers, especially at the CBM to participate in the photocatalytic process, which could enhance the photocatalytic performances [41,42].

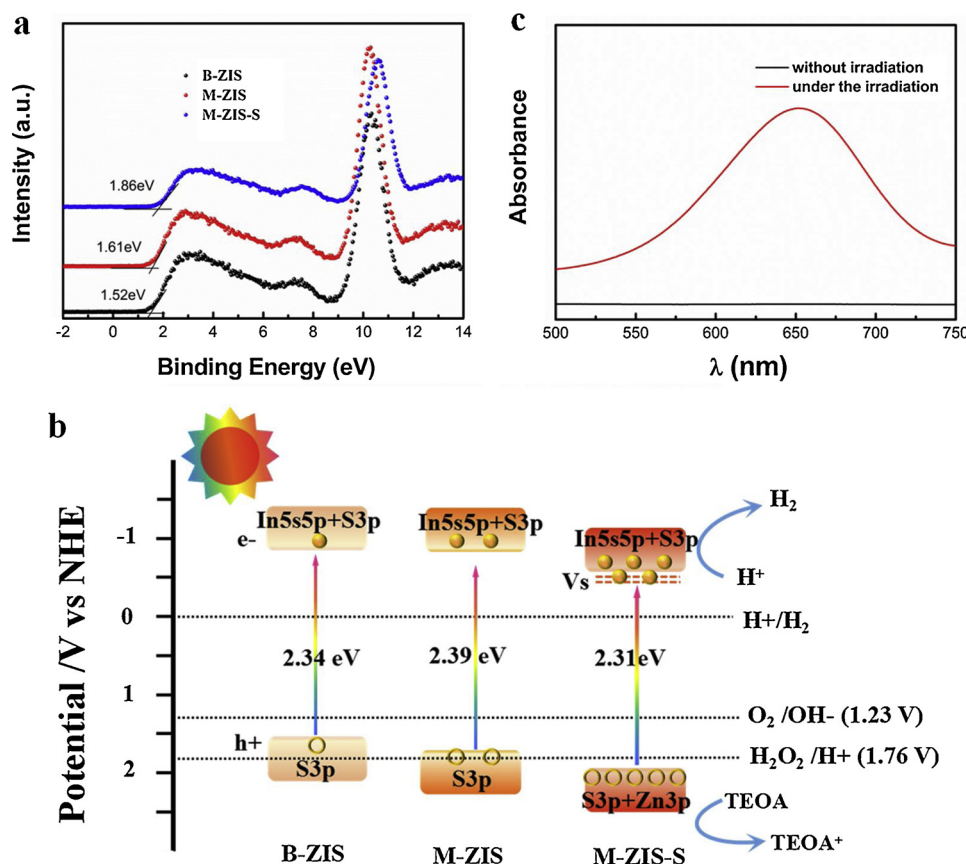


Fig. 7. (a) Valence band XPS (b) a scheme view of the  $H_2$  evolution mechanism for B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S (c) typical absorption spectra of the TMB- $H_2O_2$  mixed solution of M-ZIS-S in the dark and under the irradiation for 10 min ( $\lambda \geq 400$  nm).

### 3.6. Photocatalytic mechanism

As discussed above, M-ZIS has a better photocatalytic performance compared with B-ZIS due to the excellent properties including the elongated lifetime of photo-generated carriers, larger BET and lower overpotential. As for M-ZIS-S, it exhibits the best photocatalytic activity, attributing to the introduction of S vacancies on the basis of a monolayer which can strongly influence the CB to give more charge carriers for catalytic reaction. To obtain insight into the photocatalytic mechanism, the VB ( $E_{VB}$ ) potentials of B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S are studied by analyzing the VB XPS spectra and found to be 1.52, 1.61, and 1.86 eV versus the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE), respectively (Fig. 7a). According to the formula  $E_{CB} = E_{VB} - E_g$  [43], the CB ( $E_{CB}$ ) potentials were estimated to be -0.82, -0.78, and -0.45 eV for B-ZIS, M-ZIS, and M-ZIS-S, respectively, based on the values of  $E_g$  and  $E_{VB}$ . Therefore, a schematic view of the band structures for the samples vs NHE is shown in Fig. 7b. It's found that a reduction in the thickness and the existence of S vacancies in  $ZnIn_2S_4$  contributed to the change of the electronic structure and thus result in the shift of the band potential. Fortunately, the CB potentials of them are still higher than the reduction potentials of  $H^+/H_2$  [44]. And all the samples are capable of photocatalytic  $H_2$  evolution in spite of the shift of both VB and CB. As for M-ZIS-S, more electrons would transfer from the VB (hybridized S-3p and Zn-3p orbital) to the CB (hybridized In-5s5p and S-3p orbital) during the visible light illumination. Benefiting from the reduction in thickness, photo-induced electrons and holes can migrate to surface for the subsequent reactions effectively. Meanwhile, S vacancies can trap the electrons to suppress the recombination with holes in thermodynamic. After that, the electrons would be reduced by  $H^+$  to produce  $H_2$  ( $H^+ + e^- \rightarrow H_2$ ) and the holes would be consumed by TEOA ( $TEOA + h^+ \rightarrow TEOA^+$ ). Interestingly, it should be noted that the VB

edge is shift to higher direction compared to the  $H_2O_2/H^+$  position. Therefore, photo-induced holes could partly react with water to form  $H_2O_2$  ( $2H_2O + 2h^+ \rightarrow H_2O_2 + 2H^+$ ), enhancing by consuming holes and thus preventing the recombination of charge, as the sacrificial agent does in the photocatalytic process. In order to verify this conjecture, the existence of  $H_2O_2$  was measured by UV-vis spectroscopy using TMB as the peroxide indicator based on the principle that a characteristic peak wavelength at approximately 652 nm indicating the presence of  $H_2O_2$  [45,46]. As shown in Fig. 7c, a significant absorption peak appeared in 652 nm under visible light, demonstrating that  $H_2O_2$  was produced during visible light irradiation. This result further supports that holes could not only be consumed by sacrificial agents, but also react with water for suppressing the recombination of electron and hole efficiently, thus improving the hydrogen production efficiency. That is, M-ZIS-S has a better photocatalytic property ascribing that more electron are photo-excited to transport toward surface and the holes can be simultaneously consumed by dual pathways, boosting the utilization rate of electrons.

### 4. Conclusion

In summary, one-unit-cell  $ZnIn_2S_4$  bilayer and half-unit-cell  $ZnIn_2S_4$  monolayer have been fabricated using a one-step solvothermal method. Owing to the reduction of thickness, charge carriers would effectively migrate to surface within the shortened diffusion distance for improving the separation rate. Therefore, M-ZIS has an enhanced photocatalytic  $H_2$  rate of 1.723 mmol/g/h under the visible-light irradiation, which is higher than that of B-ZIS. Further, the introduction of S vacancy in the  $ZnIn_2S_4$  monolayer would capture the photo-generated electrons, thus extending the lifetime of photo-generated electron and hole. Due to the change of the electron structure, more charge carries



would participate in the photocatalytic activity and the holes can be rapidly consumed through the reaction with TEOA and water, resulting in an enhanced utilization rate of electrons. Therefore, M-ZIS-S exhibits an excellent photocatalytic  $H_2$  production rate up to 13.478 mmol/g/h, improving by a factor of 7.8 by the introduction of S vacancy, much higher than the available values reported so far. Overall, the development of 2D materials monolayer with the vacancy is an effective strategy to improve photocatalytic  $H_2$  production and provides a new insight into the optimization of photocatalysts.

## Acknowledgements

The National Basic Research Program of China (2014CB931700) and State Key Laboratory of Optoelectronic Materials and Technologies supported this work.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2019.02.027>.

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